

What Olympia Snowe's Support Could Mean

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The decision by Senator Olympia Snowe to [support the health care bill in the senate finance committee](#) on which Senator Snowe sits is good news, but it may not turn out to be a turning point towards getting meaningful health care reform. Snowe's vote gave the bill a solid 14-9 majority in committee. Snowe's vote helped the bill out of committee and gave a bipartisan facade to what was otherwise a party line vote. There is still a long way to go, however, between this vote and real health care reform.

The real work of turning this Senate Finance bill into a piece of progressive health care legislation, of course, remains to be done. The senate bill does not include a public option which for many progressives remains the litmus test of whether the health care bill that finally gets passed is sufficient. As the differences between the finance committee's bill and the health committee's bill are meted out, the fate of the public option will become more clear.

Snowe's vote, therefore, does not guarantee anything, but it keeps the hope of bipartisanship alive and more significantly it gives Senator Snowe a fair amount of leverage over what the final bill will be. Snowe has now positioned herself as something of a canary in the moderate coalmine. If at any time she decides the bill is too progressive and expresses discomfort about supporting it, she will now have greater influence should she not support it. Conservatives will be able to point to any change of position by Snowe as evidence that the bill is too far left and that the Democrats are once again taking us down the road to socialism. After all, they will argue, she supported the bill in committee, conveniently ignoring that she supported a different bill.

Congressional supporters of true health care reform must be careful not to let Snowe's support drive the debate and to get too tempted by the still unlikely prospect of a bipartisan bill. The Democratic Party, and in fact our entire country, is far better served by a strong Democratic health care reform than by a weaker bipartisan one. In fairness to Snowe, it may be that she now understands the import of health care reform and will support progressive legislation in that area. That, of course, would be a very positive and welcome development, but Democratic leadership would be foolish to make that assumption based on one vote on a moderate bill in committee. The Democratic leadership should welcome Snowe's support at this moment, but remain prepared to tell her in the future that the bill is going forward with or without her support.

Through her support of a moderate bill in committee, Snowe has made the Republican Party, or at least part of it, relevant again, succeeding where Michael Steele, John Boehner, Joe Wilson, Rush Limbaugh and others have failed. The Republican Party has responded not by recognizing that Snowe has actually strengthened their party's position, but by [threatening to punish Snowe by not supporting her for the position of ranking minority member on the senate commerce, science and transportation committee](#) when that position, for which Snowe would be a clear choice, becomes open. By taking this approach, the Republican Party has sent a message to

Snowe, and to all other potential moderates, is that divergence from the angry right wing extreme of the party will be punished. This is a foolish, but predictable position for the party of Limbaugh and Palin to take.

The position of the Republican Party towards the renegade moderate senator gives back to the Democrats a great deal of the leverage Snowe gained by her decision to support the bill in committee. If the Republican Party is genuinely angry at Snowe about this and unwilling to support her in the future, the Democrats can take a different approach with Snowe. Instead of crafting a bill that will ensure her continued support, which would be a foolish, but tempting path to follow, the Democratic leadership can offer Snowe further incentives to support the bill, but only if she supports it in its stronger forms.

Ultimately, the Obama administration and the Democratic leadership in congress must understand that the goal regarding health care is not simply getting a bill passed. This is too good of an opportunity on to important of an issue to settle for something less than what is needed and call it victory. While this approach may work with moderates on both sides of the aisle, it would be a major blow to Obama's extraordinarily, but not infinitely, patient base, and more importantly be a lost opportunity of historic proportions. Settling for any bill because a victory of some kind is needed will make modest improvements but also very likely push back real health care reform for another generation or two, because history has shown these opportunities don't come around too often.